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Wandering Games

By: Melissa Kagen

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8 Conclusion

This book has explored the meaning of wandering in a variety of games that emerged in the shadow of the Walking Simulator. The Introduction defined Walking Simulators as exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space. In Walking Sims, everything extraneous—enemies, goals, targets, points, NPCs—has been stripped away, leaving behind little besides the walk itself. Within gamer culture, this design choice seemed to transform such games into something else, something that (perhaps) was not quite a “real game.” But as this book argues, the Walking Sim’s conceptual and cultural prehistory as an art form dates back centuries and includes figures from the flâneur to the Wandering Jew, Tristram Shandy to Marina Abramović, the protest marcher to the religious pilgrim. The Walking Simulator inherited this lineage, adapted it patchily to the purposes of fun and subversion, and provoked a fraught backlash.

As a game mechanic, wandering has a tendency to fade into the background. Players and player characters errantly roam around video game landscapes, both figuratively and literally. How and why do we do it? What does it mean? How does the experience tap into cultural narratives, and which ones? In the preceding chapters, different preoccupations surrounding wandering have come to the fore as I’ve considered each game and brought in different sets of relevant discourses to explicate it. By asking in each instance *What does wandering mean in this game?*, we can see how those multifaceted meanings come together, resonate with other art forms and eras, and reflect some of the preoccupations of our contemporary moment.

Future work could take this research in several directions. I’ll highlight only two: analyzing other works through the theorization of wandering

games and analyzing a single core mechanic across several genres. First, I hope this research further attunes game designers, players, and scholars to the many possibilities of the wandering ludic body. Beyond being the most utilitarian mode of transit in games, wandering—of a character, a player, a story, a language, or any other aspect of a game—becomes a transcendent window into our mercurial desires and the convoluted, inefficient routes we take to try and reach them. I hope this project has convinced its readers that the wandering elements of a game are saying something important about humanity's roving heart, where they perhaps previously saw player characters' roaming as simply the most practical way to expose the flashier aspects of gameplay: the puzzles, the murders, the hidden treasures in smashable urns. The works I chose to highlight have proven interesting to consider as wandering games, but many others could also be analyzed through this lens.¹

Second, this research has exposed the critical potential of analyzing a single core mechanic across a wide variety of games. While few ludic mechanics are as foundational or widespread as "wandering," several other mechanics like "shoot," "jump," and "eat" appear in most genres and could serve a similar function to "wander" in a different project. By situating one common mechanic within some of its cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts, this style of game scholarship points toward new possibilities for makers and thinkers alike. Doing so also uncovers a productive clash between categorization in gaming (the genre) and categorization in academia (the discipline). Traditional video game genres were instantiated and marketed mostly for commercial purposes—as killer apps in various console wars, as ways to bolster a certain platform, or as digital products intended to highlight a new technology. As such, game *genre* is not the only useful category for humanistic game *scholarship*, and sometimes it even blocks us from realizing the similarities among certain aspects of games in different ludic genres. Such a focus on digital genre categorization has also sheared off nondigital games (for example, card, board, tabletop, improv, sport) from comparative consideration, leading to projects that focus heavily on one arena but limited scholarship that draws them all into conversation with one another.

The conclusions drawn from this research are important for several reasons. First, by situating contemporary games within the tradition of wandering thought, this project helps us see why the elements of the Walking Sim emerged the way they did, provoked the backlash they did, and have

percolated throughout the gaming industry, including at the AAA level. In so doing, this research responds to the “it’s just a game” thread of anti-intellectualism in gaming—those who see video games as purely technical feats of software engineering and who may therefore be less likely to recognize their precursors, implications, or contexts. The tech industry is notorious for claiming to have invented ideas that in fact have a lengthy cultural history.² Such false claims mean that digital games as an art form can appear to have sprung out of nowhere, *sui generis*, to those who create and play them, when they actually have evolved from the intersection of thinking in a variety of fields. Reclaiming that intellectual history matters, not least because it helps us see why a movement or new genre emerges. If the *Walking Sim* made such a splash, it is in part because the intellectual history behind it stretches back to Scheherazade.

Second, all four conceptual throughlines of this book—work, death, gender, and colonialism—experienced some serious upheaval during 2020, the intense year in which I wrote most of it. *Work* and *death* were particularly interesting threads, as they suggested how players use games to exorcise their complicated feelings about both topics, and 2020 helped to demonstrate dramatically how intertwined they are. In wandering games, anxieties about twenty-first-century work—its centrality, its low pay, its boringness, its meaningfulness (or meaninglessness), its uselessness—get replicated, resisted, remade into fantasies, and reformed into a pathway to spiritual transcendence. Playful work is put to serve many (sometimes contradictory) functions: it becomes an excuse to care and grieve, it eases the player into the late capitalist imperative to love one’s labor, and it helps players grapple with the fact that their work has become some combination of identity, orientation, perspective shift, curse, and calling. The concept of work in this project thus updates and reimagines (for the context of twenty-first-century American late capitalism) Aarseth’s field-defining notion in 1997’s *Cybertext* that ergodic texts are those that require nontrivial effort to traverse.³ If digital games distinguish themselves from printed texts by the effort and participation—the *work*—of the player, then what does it mean for players to do that work in 2020, when a player might feel quite anxious about their work, their play, and the crossover between the two?

Relatedly, the death investigation began because I was interested in how, in *Walking Simulators* and in archival adventuring more broadly, an

undying player explores a dead, haunted world. If video games famously ground themselves in repetitive cycles of dying and reviving, then we could think of wandering games as attempts to evade that cycle, attempts that might succeed in avoiding death itself for the player character but that then cause the PC to fall prey to grim fates more complicated (and sometimes worse) than death: the bare life of the laborer under late capitalism, the guilt and despair of total planetary destruction, the purgatorial misery of a cursed eternal life. And yet, in the struggle to avoid these fates, the wanderer can find bits of profound truth and beauty—or at least move in that direction.

These conclusions also illustrate how twenty-first-century gaming has evolved into a complicated middle age: played by more adults than children and imbued with deep philosophical questions about meaning, imperfection, and mortality. They are messy, ambitious, and confident in their uncertainty and ambivalence. This middle-aging is consistent across other findings in game studies. For instance, consider the phenomenon of dad games in the 2010s: cross-genre games in which a paternal player character cares for his children, such as *The Walking Dead*, *The Last of Us*, *God of War*, *Heavy Rain*, and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*—works that inspired a new focus on the maturing male player/developer. The male child who grew up playing Nintendo in the early 1990s now found himself grappling with the joyful challenges of fatherhood, and he wanted his gameplay to grow up alongside him. If the prevalence of dad games showed us that gamers wanted their play to reflect their current preoccupations, so do wandering games reflect the preoccupations of a Brené-Brown-style midlife reckoning.⁴ Wandering games give us the chance to walk our imperfect way toward transcendence—sometimes while offering us pleasant distractions along the way, sometimes not. As digital ludic art matures into middle age, it makes sense that it would take such contemplative steps forward.

But it also makes sense that this kind of contemplation isn't comfortable, which is why it's so often concealed behind a plethora of interactive bells and whistles. One of the results of this book is therefore a revised idea of what might be happening on an emotional level in video games that are ostensibly about other things—like fighting enemies, collecting treasures, or accomplishing lists of tasks. I began this book to look closely at the way wandering works in games that are not obviously about wandering. Although the wandering (literal or metaphorical) almost always exists in

the ludic background, we usually take it as background. But when we see the wandering as the main point rather than as a utilitarian mechanic to get us from one place to another, we begin to see the spiritual core within an art form that prides itself on technique, speed, and precision. RPGs emerge as enchanted gig economies in which adventure and creativity actually hold their meaning for the yearning creative spirit. Postapocalyptic AAA games come into focus as cursed, twenty-first-century digital pilgrimages. The parts of games that typically fade into the background reflect our most everyday—and our deepest—desires for meaning, contentment, and purpose.

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